DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 292 399 HE 021 263

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TITLE Successful Strategies in Small College Enrollment. ASHE Annual Meeting Paper.
PUB DATE Nov 87
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (Baltimore, MD, November 21-24, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Strategies; College Admission; *Enrollment Trends; Higher Education; Institutional Mission; Liberal Arts; Marketing; *Private Colleges; *Small Colleges; *Student Recruitment; *Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS *ASHE Annual Meeting; *Enrollment Management

ABSTRACT

Strategies used by small liberal arts colleges to maintain adequate enrollment levels were assessed, with attention to colleges that were classified as private liberal arts II colleges by the Carnegie Commission. The baccalaureate degree was the highest degree offered by the colleges in programs in the arts and sciences and in teacher preparation. Only those colleges with 1985 enrollment of between 650 and 1,500 students were considered. The survey developed for this study was sent to each institution in an intentional sample of 79 colleges; a total of 55 completed instruments was returned for a response rate of 70 percent. Those institutions consisted of 20 colleges with declining enrollment, 14 with stable enrollment, and 21 whose enrollment was increasing. The findings indicate that these traditional liberal arts colleges as a whole have not greatly deviated from their liberal arts focus, at least philosophically. Use of the following adaptive strategies was assessed: changes to attract and retain students, receptiveness to change, and types of decision-making information in use. Use of interpretive strategy approaches were also considered: focus for the academic program, initiative with external groups, communication and cooperation within the institution, presidential impact, and strength of institutional mission. Included are 19 references. (SW)

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ED292399

Successful Strategies in Small College Enrollment

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Paper read at the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Baltimore, November 1987.

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Sheraton Inner Harbor Hotel in Baltimore, Maryland, November 21-24, 1987. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

Successful Strategies in Small College Enrollment

The Enrollment Challenge

In 1980 the Carnegie Council reported that the institution most susceptible to the combined forces of enrollment decline and a reduction in federal aid and state support would be the private liberal arts college (Carnegie Commission, 1980). These institutions depend on tuition for operating budgets, and cannot respond rapidly to declining numbers of students or shifts in curriculum demands. Predictions have continued to indicate in the years since the Carnegie report that liberal arts colleges, with their limited curricular and fiscal flexibility, would suffer and perhaps close in great numbers during the decades of the expected enrollment decline (Breneman, 1983; Finklestein, Farrar, & Pfinster, 1984).

Predictions have generally indicated college enrollment would begin to decline around 1980, and begin to recover around 1997. Since 1980 overall enrollment rates have remained relatively stable (AACRAO, 1986). However, when institutional categories are examined individually, it becomes apparent that private liberal arts colleges are losing students, primarily to comprehensive institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1986). In the decade between 1972 and 1982, 77 private four-year colleges closed (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1986). In 1983 enrollment at private liberal arts colleges declined 3% from the previous year, while private comprehensive institutions gained 9.7% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1986). Between 1980 and 1985 private liberal arts colleges with fewer than 1,000 students declined by 5.5%

(The College Board, 1986). These figures indicate that although a pervasive enrollment decline has yet to occur, liberal arts colleges are suffering most heavily from loss of enrollment.

Institutional Response

Chaffee and others (1983) report several instances of liberal arts colleges which survived a crisis in the 1970's and were strengthened by the experience. A number of reasons have been given for this success. Institutional character may provide an explanation for the success of some liberal arts colleges in meeting the problems of the 1980's. Two characteristics mentioned frequently in the literature regarding successful institutions are the leadership of a strong president and the existence of a strong mission statement (Peck, 1983; Green & Levine, 1985).

As institutions of higher education realized the need for responding to a changing environment in recent years, many have turned to business and organizational theory for guidelines in coping with this new challenge. The concept of strategic management is increasingly applied to colleges and universities. Strategic management is a complex socio-dynamic process for strategic change which goes beyond planning to include entrepreneurial management and its integration with planning (Chaffee, 1985). Strategic management can be separated into three distinct models of strategy: linear, adaptive, and interpretive.

Chaffee (1984) notes that strategic management in higher education can be identified as either adaptive or interpretive in its

methods. When using the adaptive model, the organization is viewed as a single entity with a variety of operational parts that interact with the many aspects of a changing environment. The immediate goal is the accumulation of limited resources and the survival of the organization. The basic issue that the organization seeks to answer is "What are we doing?" so that resources can be maximized. This strategy is structured to deal with changing environmental demands, especially the decline or the termination of incoming resources. Typical reactions to this type of fluctuation by the organization include changes in products or services, diversifications or additions, modification or deletions that would appeal to the market, and attempts toward improving efficiency.

Many small, independent liberal arts colleges that are experiencing environmental difficulties have attempted to develop strategies for survival by relying primarily on an adaptive model of strategic management. These institutions have attempted to maintain their solvency by developing new academic programs, hiring marketing consultants, establishing more career oriented programs to make up for declining liberal arts, establishing branch facilities, adding new programs with only minor changes within the curriculum, using faculty to teach subjects out of their area of expertise, and pursing an all-out admissions program without a similar effort to improve retention (Chaffee, 1984).

The interpretive model of strategic management requires social and collegial organizational arrangements. The primary issue to be addressed is the organization's legitimacy, and this is determined by the participants answering the question "Why are we together?"

Changes are effected not by environmental demands or market forces, but by those participants who are dissatisfied with various perceptions which involve the organization's credibility and legitimacy. The integration and orientation of the participants rests on the nature of the concepts and symbols communicated both within and without the organization. The interpretive model, in terms of strategic action, is always in perpetual motion with the participants, who are also changing and interacting.

Some strategies used by small liberal arts institutions which incorporate an interpretive paradigm are attempted in an effort to improve the public's perception of the institution. In this model, the aim of those in leadership roles is to inspire the active participation and concern of the academic community, to encourage greater involvement and financial support among the college trustees, and to project a more positive image within the public sector.

Although both models offer actions which could be used effectively by institutions in their efforts to bring about changes or improvements, Chaffee found that no one model was used exclusively. There were times when institutions may have used adaptations of each model based on their individual needs; however, Chaffee observed that those institutions which experienced a variety of serious economic and environmental problems were those most likely to utilize only the adaptive model in their strategies for survival. Colleges that were more resilient tended to use both models, but were more likely to take actions that reflected the interpretive mode.

The convergence of changing demographic trends with reductions in federal and state aid to higher education has motivated college

and university administrators to discover new ways of attracting and retaining students. The use of enrollment management techniques is one response of liberal arts colleges to the current enrollment challenge. Enrollment management is not merely another term for recruitment strategies, but a wholistic approach to influencing college enrollments. It is an assertive means of ensuring the steady supply of qualified new students needed to maintain vitality in a given institution (Baldridge, Kemerer, & Green, 1982). The process of enrollment management has three of the same goals held by adaptive management: 1) to develop better awareness of institutional purpose in relation to the market in which it competes; 2) to improve ties to prospective client groups; and 3) to attract students into and through the institution to the point of graduation.

Enrollment management is concerned with the purpose and mission of the institution and how it is communicated to the external community and to potential students. It is a means of closely monitoring the college's relationship to the environment and determining its share of the market. Specific strategies in the enrollment management model include market and institutional research, demographic tracking, enhanced and informed recruitment techniques, retention research and programs designed to increase retention rates.

Purpose of the Study

Most predictions have indicated that small liberal arts colleges will be greatly affected by the expected decline in enrollment in the next decade. Indeed, some of these colleges are already experiencing declining enrollments and fiscal crises. However, there are many liberal arts colleges whose enrollment is maintaining an even balance, and some which are actually increasing. The problem raised then, is what is happening at those "successful" colleges which enables them to maintain or increase enrollment in the face of all expectations? Are they in fact, as some would suggest, "selling out their liberal arts" in order to maintain a healthy enrollment level?

Chaffee would suggest that the use of both adaptive and interpretive management strategies is the key in determining the success of small liberal arts colleges. This study examines specific strategies designated as either adaptive or interpretive to determine their impact on enrollment. The fundamental questions addressed are: 1) What strategies and programs are currently in use at liberal arts colleges to influence enrollment objectives or performance?; and 2) What relationship can be determined between the use of these enrollment strategies and programs and selected measures of enrollment performance?

Methodology

Institutions selected for this study were chosen on the basis of several criteria. The study examines liberal arts colleges which are defined by: 1) inclusion in the Carnegie Commission (1976) classification of private liberal arts II colleges; 2) the highest

degree offered by the college in 1985 was the baccalaureate degree; and 3) degrees were offered only in programs in the arts and sciences and in teacher preparation. Only those colleges with a reported 1985 enrollment of between 650 and 1,500 students were considered, in order to increase similarity among institutions included in the sample, and to exclude from the study extremely small colleges.

From these criteria a population of almost 300 institutions was identified, and an intentional sample of 79 colleges was selected. This sample was adjusted to include approximately equal numbers of colleges whose enrollments had declined, remained stable, or increased between the fall semesters of 1980 and 1985. Based on the findings of previous studies, and the small size of the institutions in this study and their dependence on tuition revenues, it was determined that significant enrollment change would occur at ± 4 percent. This resulted in 30 declining, 18 stable, and 31 increasing institutions.

There were two primary methods of data collection for this study. Enrollment data and certain demographic information was obtained from the Higher Education Directory for 1980 and 1985. In addition, the Small College Enrollment Strategy Survey was developed in order to address the specific questions raised by this study. An instrument from a similar study regarding state universities (Muston, 1985b) plus a list of interview question topics from a study of liberal arts colleges in financial trouble (Chaffee, 1984) provided guidelines in the development of this instrument.

The framework for the 82 strategic items which form the body of the survey was based on the topic areas in Chaffee's typology of strategic actions. Specific questions were taken from Muston's and Chaffee's studies, and generated from key issues and suggested actions raised in the enrollment management literature. Items selected were placed within the framework suggested by Chaffee. For adaptive strategy this included: 1) changes made to attract and retain students; 2) receptiveness to change; and 3) types of decision making information in use. The interpretive strategy framework included: 4) focus for the academic program; 5) initiative with external groups; and 6) communication and cooperation within the institution. Two additional categories were added to the interpretive framework from other literature on successful colleges: 7) presidential impact, and 8) strength of mission.

The strategic action questions asked whether the item had occured or was in use at the college for a period of time between 1981 and 1985. A total of five possible responses were available for each strategic item, ranging from "not at all" to "to a very great extent". A final open-ended question provided the opportunity for the respondents to comment on strategic actions in use which were not addressed by the instrument, and to offer their opinion regarding reasons for the enrollment change occuring at their institution in the past five years.

The survey was sent to the admissions director of each institution included in the sample. A total of 55 completed instruments was returned, for a response rate of 70 percent. Mean and standard deviations were calculated for each of the strategies to

determine a rate of usage for the entire sample. This was done both in the aggregate and for the three institutional clusters, grouped by declining, maintaining, and increasing enrollments. Analysis of variance was performed to identify significant differences among the importance of each of the strategies.

To determine the relationship between use of these enrollment strategies and selected measures of enrollment performance, multiple regression statistics were performed, using percent of enrollment change from 1980 to 1985 as the dependent variable. To ensure that the difference in enrollment change was due to implemented strategies and not inherent differences, the institutions were compared on several characteristics for 1985. These included: 1) number of academic programs offered; 2) proportion of full-time to part-time students; 3) proportion of full-time to part-time faculty; 4) proportion of resident to non-resident students; 5) frequency of certain admissions criteria; and 6) state in which the institution was located. These characteristics were used in the regression equation as independent variables. The 82 strategic items on the survey were regrouped into eight variables representing Chaffee's strategic framework, and also became independent variables. 45 of the respondents made additional comments on the final open-ended question, regarding both specific strategies and general impressions of the causes of enrollment change. These comments were divided into naturally emerging groups, using Glaser and Strauss' constant and comparative procedure.

Results

Of the 55 institutional respondents, 20 had declining, 14 had maintaining, and 21 increasing enrollments. In the declining group, the institutions classified themselves primarily as selective, with one having an open-door policy and two having competitive admissions standards. The decliners offered a mean of 27.7 majors, with a range of 14 to 45. These institutions are located in 19 states, nine of them in states in the Northeast and Midwest, the area predicted to experience the greatest college enrollment decline. Their average 1980 enrollment was 987 and the average 1985 enrollment was 855, a 13 percent decline. The range of enrollment change was from -.07 to -.59 percent.

The maintaining institutions also classified themselves as selective, with none having an open-door policy, and only one being competitive. They offered an average of 33 majors, with a range of 20 to 70. These institutions are located in 10 states, with eight of them in states in the Northeast and Midwest. Their average 1980 enrollment was 1,017 and the average 1985 enrollment was 1,024, a .007 percent increase. The enrollment change in this group ranged from +.04 to -.04 percent.

The increasing institutions also predominently classified themselves as selective, with two having an open-door and two having competitive admissions standards. They offered an average of 32 majors, with a range of 14 to 47. These institutions are located in 14 states, ten of them in states in the Northeast and Midwest. Their average 1980 enrollment was 952 and the average 1985 enrollment was

1,118, an increase of 17 percent. The range of enrollment change was from +.06 to +.58 percent.

Table 1 reflects the mean of specific items for all responding institutions. Of the fourteen items with the highest means, ten were philosophical statements rather than specific enrollment strategies. Three had to do with the strength of the liberal arts mission (57,74,58), while another three items concern regard for the individual (77,75,56). This finding would appear to bear out Chaffee's assertion that interpretive strategy, in this case symbolism and communication, is of great importance in an institution's strategic planning. Of the four non-philosophical statements, three items had to do with recruitment practices (27,26,31), and the fourth with continuing registration (44). The five items with the lowest means all deal with practices which would change the mission of the college, indicating that the mission has essentially remained the same at these institutions.

Means were also determined for each item within the Declining, Maintaining and Increasing enrollment groups, and several of the items seemed unrelated to enrollment trends when viewed across all three groups. Table 2 shows the differences in means across groups for selected items. It is interesting to note that it is the declining institutions rather than those who are increasing who report the hiring of a consultant (13). Although development of a distinctive character in relationship to their competitors (55) is important for all institutions, it is more significant at the Maintaining institutions than the others. The Increasing institutions indicate the lowest score for reaffirming the previous

mission statement (58) and using the mission statement to guide the development of new programs (60), while they have the highest score for adding required courses to the curriculum (4) and that the new mission adds programs outside the expertise of the faculty (80).

Table 3 presents the results of a stepwise multiple regression for 50 of the institutions in this study (the other five are missing due to casewise deletion of missing data). Stepwise multiple regression was used to identify the best predictors of enrollment growth since the variable could not be included in a setwise manner on the basis of theory. Six independent variables, included at the $p = .10$ or less, accounted for 53 percent of the variance in enrollment change. The large size of the explained variance may be due in part to the small sample size.

These variables clearly support the adaptive strategy in terms of college growth over the past five years. The strong association between hiring a retention consultant and enrollment decline suggest that institutions respond to decline by trying to develop strategies to increase enrollment. The remaining variables indicate that institutions that enroll instate, commutor students, and expand the times courses are offered are likely to increase enrollments. Thus, institutions that moved away from purely residential, day courses in traditional subjects (e.g. maintained a traditional liberal arts interpretive strategy) fared less well than institutions that adapted to new student needs and populations. In addition, institutions that had a caring atmosphere, in which faculty and administration demonstrated concern for individuals, were also likely to maintain enrollments.

Discussion

The findings of this study would indicate that these traditional liberal arts colleges as a whole have not greatly deviated from their liberal arts focus, at least philosophically. The statements receiving the lowest positive responses across all institutions were those dealing with a changing mission. However, when the categories are examined individually, it can be seen that the Increasing institutions did add more required courses, tended to add more programs outside the expertise of the faculty, and less frequently reaffirmed the previous liberal arts mission statement and used it to guide future programming.

The specific enrollment management or adaptive strategies addressed in the study were for the most part used moderately across all institutions. Only two, toll free lines to the admissions office (4.47), and participation in college nights (4.40) were in the ten most frequently used strategies. However, only one, added graduate courses for the first time, scored extremely low (1.33). Of the three institutional categories, the Declining institutions had the highest score for added graduate courses (1.42). For many of the adaptive items, such as courses primarily to serve the community, the Maintaining colleges scored just slightly higher in comparison with the others. This may indicate that these strategies are helpful in maintaining an enrollment balance, but once an institution has reached a position of strength (Increasing) they are no longer as important.

Each of the independent variables in the regression equation related to enrollment increases would be classified as elements of Chaffee's strategy. This contradicts Chaffee's earlier work in which

she found that adaptive strategies were employed by all of the institutions in her sample, but those whose enrollment grew also employed interpretive strategies. On the other hand, these findings are consistent with many of the suggestions offered by Keller (1983) as well as those of Baldridge, et al., 1982; Hossler, 1984; 1986; and Huston, 1986b. Through the use of marketing research and strategic planning they advocate the use of adaptive strategies which enable institutions to:

1.) Have a clearer understanding of their niche in the student marketplace.

2.) Respond to meet the educational needs of students.

3.) Create institutional environments where staff and faculty are responsive to students.

Since this study included a different sample and employed methodologies different from those utilized by Chaffee, these findings can only be considered as representative of the set of institutions investigated. This investigation does, however, raise questions about the efficacy of interpretive and adaptive strategies and begs for further research in this area. It would be interesting to see if the same variables would emerge if the institutions were Liberal Arts I colleges or research universities. Since more selective institutions are less reliant upon a local pool of students, would a high ratio of instate students prove to be positively correlated with enrollment growth? Furthermore, would increasing the number of academic programs be an effective strategy? Perhaps we would discover that the uniqueness of types of institutions dictates differing strategies in order to influence student enrollments.

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TABLE 2

Indicators of Usage, by group

Item #	Description	Mean	D	M	I
1	Expanded days & times courses offered	2.51	2.05	2.57	2.90
2	Added graduate courses for first time	1.33	1.42	1.35	1.24
4	Added required courses to curriculum	2.74	2.50	2.64	3.05
6	Offered courses at locations off-campus	1.85	1.55	1.64	2.29
9	Courses primarily to serve community	2.23	2.00	2.64	2.19
10	Released managers/hire experienced	1.76	1.89	1.25	1.95
13	Hired consultant	2.47	3.10	2.50	1.86
44	Prior term registration/continuing	3.72	3.85	3.26	3.95
51	Hired new admissions director	3.01	3.35	2.64	2.95
54	Built up athletic teams	3.01	2.60	3.15	3.33
56	Additional physical plant	3.13	2.65	3.38	3.43
55	Development of distinctive character	3.47	3.40	3.71	3.38
58	Reaffirmed previous mission statement	4.09	4.30	4.27	3.76
60	Mission statement guides new programs	3.70	3.65	4.07	3.52
61	Continuous program review	3.32	3.00	3.64	3.43
65	Concern for quality education	3.98	3.75	4.21	4.05
68	Mission effectively conveyed to public	3.14	2.95	3.50	3.09
70	Business/academic functions integrated	3.16	2.79	3.36	3.38
72	Faculty/admin cooperation fostered	3.56	3.25	3.93	3.62
76	Efforts center on serving students	4.12	3.85	4.50	4.14
79	Part-time faculty as administrators	1.85	1.40	2.29	2.00
80	New mission adds areas outside expertise	1.25	1.10	1.14	1.50

D = Declining institutions
M = Maintaining institutions
I = Increasing institutions

TABLE 1

Highest and Lowest Usage Reported

Item_#	Description	Mean
57	College operates on liberal arts mission	4.54
27	Toll free lines to admissions office	4.47
26	Participation in college nights, fairs	4.40
77	Administrators demonstrate concern for individual	4.26
75	Faculty demonstrate concern for individual	4.18
76	Serving the student is central effort	4.12
74	Trustees actively supportive of mission	4.09
58	Previous mission statement reaffirmed	4.09
65	Pervasive concern for quality education	3.98
73	President plays large role in success	3.98
67	Enrollment concerns a priority across campus	3.92
44	Continuing students register in previous term	3.72
31	Utilization of CEEB/ACT Student Searches	3.56
72	Faculty/administration cooperation is fostered	3.56
62	Required courses added have changed mission	1.49
63	New majors added have changed mission	1.48
2	Added graduate courses for first time	1.33
80	New mission adds areas outside faculty expertise	1.25
64	Graduate courses added have changed mission	1.07

1 = Not at All
2 = To a Small Extent
3 = To Some Extent
4 = To a Great Extent
5 = To a Very Great Extent

TABLE 3

Stepwise Regression of Enrollment Change from 1980 to 1985 on the Selected Independent Variables

Independent Variable	Beta Weight	P
Hired a retention specialist	-.33	.004
Percent of instate students	.28	.02
Expanded times courses offered	.25	.05
Percent of commutor students	.25	.04
Concern for individuals	.24	.02
Number of academic programs offered	.19	.07
R2	.59	
Adjusted R2	.53	

(n=50; df 6,43)